

WASHINGTON POST
28 February 1987

Abrams' Role In Contra Aid Still Unclear

Tower Report Gives Conflicting Accounts

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The Tower board report provides new and conflicting accounts on the role of Elliott Abrams, the controversial assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, in efforts to aid the Nicaraguan contras, particularly in connection with a secret Costa Rican airstrip.

Abrams, 38, worked closely with National Security Council aide Oliver L. North on contra issues during the two years that Congress banned U.S. aid to the rebels. He said last year that he "talked to Ollie every day" about the contras, often in meetings of the Special (or Restricted) Interagency Group (SIG or RIG) on Central America that convened once or twice a week at the State Department.

Eight to 10 officials from State, the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the NSC made up the group, which oversaw day-to-day implementation of U.S. policy in the region, Abrams' spokesman Greg Lagana said yesterday.

Lagana said Abrams would not comment until after the president responds to the report next week.

The Tower board found that "Congress may have been actively misled" on the extent of NSC involvement with the contras. North had detailed records of the contras' spending for military equipment and operations in April 1985, and by that fall he "was actively engaged in private efforts to resupply the contras with lethal equipment," the report said. It cited a North memo dated Nov. 22, 1985, that spoke of "our first direct flight" of ammunition to the rebels.

At the State Department, Abrams told the Tower board, "We did not engage in, nor did we really know anything about this private

network." Diplomats were told "to kind of stay away, as the [CIA] people were, on the grounds that if you got too close, you would end up being accused of facilitating."

Abrams repeatedly denied to Congress any knowledge of the network. In a Dec. 12, 1986, interview, Abrams said, "If a few hundred rifles were received at a contra camp, the U.S. would know of it promptly. [But] we had no information at any time about who was paying for this."

However, Lewis A. Tambs told the Tower panel that when he was preparing to become the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica in July 1985, the RIG that included Abrams gave him "instructions . . . to aid the Nicaraguan resistance forces in setting up a 'southern front.'"

(Lagana said yesterday that "the commission report is wrong" in saying that Abrams, North and the director of the CIA task force on Central America were the only members of the RIG.)

A CIA field officer told the panel that a secret 6,250-foot airstrip at Santa Elena was "a pet project" of Tambs' as soon as he arrived in Costa Rica. "It was essentially the ambassador's initiative," he said.

Abrams, named to his post that same month, visited Costa Rica soon afterward and asked the CIA officer there about the airstrip. The officer asked where Abrams had learned of it. "He said, 'Col. North told me about it and I assume that the [director of the CIA task force] knows about it.'"

Abrams told the Tower panel, however, that he could not remember when or from whom he had learned about the airstrip.

North said in a September 1986 memo cited by the Tower panel that the airfield had been used "for direct resupply" of the contras from July 1985 through February 1986, and thereafter to receive emergency landings. Abrams told the panel that his understanding was "nobody ever used the airstrip . . . It had never quite gotten into operation."

Despite this apparent disagreement, Abrams, North and Tambs agreed they had conferred by telephone on Sept. 9, 1986, on ways to keep Costa Rican President Oscar Arias from making the airstrip's existence public.

North wrote that Tambs and Ab-

rams told him to call Arias and threaten to withhold \$80 million in U.S. aid if the airstrip were revealed. "Tambs then called Arias . . . Arias then got the same word from Elliott," North's memo said.

Asked about the airstrip, Abrams said, "Everybody involved in the RIG knew that Ollie was somehow connected with this but did not know why . . . I think most of us were careful not to ask lots of questions, other than once in a while to say, 'Is this all okay, is this stuff legal?'"

[Arias, in Mexico City on a visit, told reporters last night, "I have never met Oliver North in my life or spoken with him on the telephone."]

North and Abrams also had conflicting versions of Abrams' role in talks with Israel over possible aid in training the rebels in exchange for Honduras' purchase of Israeli Kfir jet fighters. "Abrams likes the idea," North said in a May 1986 memo.

Abrams told the Tower board "he did not recall ever discussing any offer of Israeli assistance to the contras with Lt. Col. North."

Last Nov. 25, Abrams was asked by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence about third-country donations for the contras and did not reveal that he had solicited \$10 million from the sultan of Brunei. On Dec. 8, he apologized to the committee, according to the committee's Iran arms probe report.

"He said he did not feel he had been asked a direct question and did not realize until shown the transcript that his statements clearly left a misleading impression," the report said.